



Engage Your Readers

How direct marketers are using content and offers to capture customers

When you read studies showing average e-mail open and clickthrough rates, do you compare your own results to these statistics with glee or chagrin? In either case, you have the opportunity to improve your results if you put a laser-like focus on your audience members. Give them content and offers they want, and you have a better chance of engaging them.

The best e-mail marketing campaigns inject elements designed to stimulate interest and encourage interactivity. In short, they delight and engage readers. And, if your recipients feel this way about your program, they will be with you for the long haul. They'll be much more likely to open and read your e-mails. The goal: to make your campaign one your recipients look forward to receiving.

Here are some ways to do this, along with examples from your fellow direct marketers.

Value-added Content

If you include engaging editorial content in your promotional programs, your readers will begin to anticipate this information and be more likely to open your e-mails. Content can take the form

To engage readers, Weight Watchers includes a customer weight-loss story in every issue of its weekly e-newsletter.

of tips, factoids or how-to information of interest to your audience.

Breck's, a mail-order gardening company, promotes its flowers and bulbs in its weekly e-mails. It includes a feature called "Breck's Expert Tips" near the bottom of most campaigns. That's a smart strategy, because recipients who look forward to the regular column must scroll down and view all of Breck's offerings before they get to it.

Doctors Foster and Smith, the pet supplies cataloger, sends specialized versions of its newsletters based on pet ownership. Its cat owner pro-

gram, for example, usually includes a link in the header that points to articles on its online Doctors' Information Center for Cats, a site loaded with more than 100 useful articles.

Use Customers' Comments or Compelling Quotes

Share feedback you've received from your readers or give them something to think about.

Film Movement sends a monthly newsletter comprised of information on upcoming movie releases, special offers and events. A regular column called Members Thoughts on Our

Films provides both positive and negative reviews. It turns into compelling content when one customer posts a negative review—and others chime in on a subsequent issue to explain why they liked the film.

Weight Watchers spotlights one customer's success story in each of its weekly newsletters. Readers may identify with a real person who slimmed down using the Weight Watchers system.

Include Polls or Surveys

Anything you can do to encourage

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interactivity with and among your readers will tighten your relationship with them. Invite them to weigh in with their opinions and thoughts.

Catholic Relief Services publishes a monthly newsletter on issues and the progress the organization is making. It includes an instant poll to take the pulse of readers on topical issues.

Godiva Chocolatier occasionally sends surveys to past purchasers and often ties participation in the survey to an offer. A recent example had the subject line, "Tell us what you think and save 10% on your next order."

Business & Legal Reports offers several newsletters. Its *Safety Ezine* features a weekly poll on a subject of interest to the audience, and reports responses to the previous week's poll.

Give Readers a Chance to Ask Questions

Readers often are intrigued by situations others are facing, and this gives you another opportunity to encourage interaction.

Food and wine merchant Stew Leonard's includes in its e-newsletter, Ask Our Sommelier, a column that gives readers the opportunity to pose questions about wine.

Staples offers a business newsletter for members of its Staples Business Gold Rewards program. In the column Ask a Business Expert, its authority presents a question submitted by a reader and provides a detailed answer. The column also includes a link for readers to pose their own questions.

Lists

People love to know what others are buying. Why not use this as a way to sell more products? And, they love lists of best things to do.

Cataloger Lands' End often uses this technique. In February it highlighted "12 Memorable Ways to Say Happy Valentine's Day." During the summer when parents may be getting ready to send their kids off to camp, it featured summertime products in an e-mail titled "Must Haves for Two Weeks." Of course, it promoted its own prod-

ucts, but also included on the list such items as stamped and pre-addressed postcards or envelopes, and a disposable camera.

The Sierra Club Insider's recent feature "Top 10 Summer Energy Tips" offered ways to save on cooling costs. The same e-newsletter also challenged readers to test their energy IQ with an efficiency and conservation quiz.

Mix it Up

Vary the cadence of your messages in terms of format, tone and mission.

CheapHumidors.com, which sells cigar accessories, regularly sends promotional HTML e-mails, but varies the format once a month with an all-text e-mail that deals with the art and style of cigar smoking. For example, a recent newsletter explained that a cigar that's puffed more than once per minute will burn hotter and faster and may have an overwhelming taste. The e-mail ended with a "plug" for the purveyor's products.

Designer furniture and home accessories merchant Design Within Reach has an e-mail program that's an interesting mix of long-form stories about aspects of the industry, localized promotions for in-store events, and notes from the CEO asking for survey information.

Use Multimedia

With the growing use of broadband and high-speed Internet connections among consumers and most businesses, it's time to consider integrating audio and video into your e-mail marketing campaigns.

Taunton Press' *Fine Cooking* e-newsletter recently ran a feature titled "Grilled Rib-Eye: How to tell when it's rare, medium, or well." The article was accompanied by a link to a four-minute online video that demonstrated a simple procedure to test steaks.

IBM offers an innovative multimedia newsletter called *ForwardView*. The e-mail highlights articles for the month and is written with the reader in mind. All of the copy is crafted based on why the recipient might be interested in the topics. The actual content

is online with a presentation that's a mix of audio and video, background music and articles.

Cataloger L.L. Bean wanted to underscore its product guarantee, so in a recent e-mail, it explained that every product is put to the test in the lab and in the field. It provided a link to its latest TV spot called Testing for Life and examples of reports from independent testers.

Customer Focus

I'd be remiss if I didn't highlight marketers who've developed excellent, customer-focused, e-mail programs.

Technology solutions provider HP offers various newsletters. One of my favorites is *HP Technology at Work*, which provides useful information on business and technology topics. It also offers *HP Learning Center News*, which contains short, online courses on different topics. Neither of these programs overtly sells HP products; instead they engender loyalty from readers. They also allow recipients to customize their interests.

Scotts, the lawn care and garden supplies company, has a great program that begins with collecting customer information at sign-up (e.g., location, areas of interest). It then uses this information to provide helpful information on what consumers can do to take better care of their properties.

We've looked at many examples of how to focus on your audience. Create your own swipe-file of ideas by signing up for e-mail programs offered by others. It's a great way to keep your finger on the pulse of what's new and innovative. Then map out a plan on how you might incorporate some features into your own programs.

Happy customers are loyal customers. Find ways to amaze, delight and engage your readers. I guarantee you'll reap the rewards. ■

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